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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews 5 articles published in 1995 on family literacy research. The articles reviewed are: (1) a study on literacy in Iceland by Ronald Taylor which examined how Icelandic families share language and reading related activities; (2) an article by Barbara Moss and Gay Fawcett which describes and comments on different home literacy environments that influence highly literate adults in the United States; (3) an article by Trevor Cairney and Lynne Munsie which describes the goals of the "Talk to a Literacy Learner (TTALL)" program in Australia to increase parental participation in the literacy of their children and to train community resource people to help with community literacy activities; (4) a report by Barbara Come and Anthony Fredericks on the "Families That Read, Succeed" program in Savannah, Georgia which describes planning strategies, school-university collaboration, in-school literacy activities, and offers ideas for home-school connections for at-risk children and their parents; and (5) an article about the "FLAME" program developed by Timothy Shanahan, Margaret Mulhern, and Flora Rodriguez-Brown to provide literacy training to parents in linguistic minority families (in this case, Latino families) to support their children's school learning. (CR)

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Family Literacy Research
A Review of Five Journal Articles

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There is a growing worldwide interest in family literacy reflected in the recent research literature on reading. This interest is not only on what constitute good family literacy practices, but also on how to create and foster those practices, especially in families where the children are at risk of growing up with poor literacy skills. This review looks at five articles published in 1995 that report family literacy research. One study is from Iceland, one from Australia, and three are from the United States.

Why Icelandic Families are Highly Literate

Literacy in Iceland is relatively high for all children. Taylor, 1995, reports that "A comprehensive testing of Icelandic school children was completed for the purpose of international comparisons. Fourth-grade and ninth-grade students were tested with the IEA International Reading Test (Elley, 1992). Among the 31 nations participating in the testing. Icelandic ninth graders ranked first in comprehension of expository text and fourth in comprehension of narrative text" (Taylor, 1995, p. 198).

Taylor's study looked at "how families share language and reading-related activities in a society with a tradition of widespread and prevalent literacy... In a review of the research from varied international contexts (England, Holland, Israel, New Zealand, Russia, United States), I found several family-shared literacy activities to be recurrent" (Taylor, 1995, p. 194). These included: family activities promoting togetherness, family use of the library, parental modeling of reading, practical reading in the home, shared reading by family members, parental support of school, verbal interaction in the home, family television use, and writing activities in the home.

Iceland has a long history of practices which promote family literacy including shared reading, storytelling and versemaking. Traditional literature found in nearly every Icelandic home includes Icelandic sagas about famous Vikings and folk, fairy tales, poems, riddles, and sayings about the huldafolk, or hidden people who live inside the mountains, rocks, and natural elements. "The old Icelandic adage 'Better shoeless than bookless' expresses the importance of book ownership and reading among Icelanders" (Taylor, 1995, p. 198).

The families Taylor studied were chosen at random from families that had a six year old child. They represented four groups: urban with higher (college or university) educated mothers, urban with less educated mothers (any level below college), nonurban with higher educated mothers, and nonurban with less educated mothers.

All of the families had numerous books on many subjects for children. All had Icelandic storybooks, classic fairy tales, animal books, alphabet/number books, and Disney Club books. They also all had cassette players and Icelandic stories and children's songs on tape. There were also many adult books in all the homes. One family with a higher educated mother had 1,200 books in their library, and one with a lesser educated mother had 265 books.

Reading practices varied with education: the families with higher (or college) educated mothers read more; however all but one parent in the study read the newspaper daily. "Fiction by Icelandic authors was by far the most preferred reading of parents, followed by biographies of Icelanders, the Icelandic sagas and commentary on the sagas, Icelandic history and historical fiction, and Icelandic poetry... All families shared reading daily at bedtime (parents and/or siblings with younger children)" (Taylor, 1995, p. 208).

Most of the Icelandic families Taylor studied are clearly providing a home environment that promotes literacy in their children. The other studies reviewed here report on projects designed to promote literacy in families that don't have Iceland's rich cultural tradition.

Good Home Literacy Environments in the U.S.

In their paper, "Bringing the Curriculum of the World of the Home to the School," Moss and Fawcett (1995) describe and comment on different home literacy environments that influenced highly literate adults. One mother did not read children's literature to her children. Instead, "Our regular read-aloud sessions were actually 'family devotions,' when we climbed onto Mom's big bed and listened to her read the Bible aloud. She would pause often to explain King James English. Bible reading was part of the curriculum of my home—a curriculum that

taught me story structure from the traditional Bible stories, vocabulary from my mother's explanations, and an appreciation for the beauty of our language from the Psalms" (Moss and Fawcett, 1995, p. 248).

Moss and Fawcett comment that reading materials "might include newspapers, advertisements, announcements, lists, poems, songs, etc." (Moss and Fawcett, 1995, p. 249) and suggest that parents be invited into the classroom regularly to share all kinds of reading.

Other Moss and Fawcett examples include storytelling; the modeling of writing by parents who write lots of letters, lists, or lessons; playing word and language games; and having family discussions where children are included as participants of real conversations. Their comments and quotes from other researchers about family talk is especially telling for teachers. "Classroom talk differs from home conversations, however, in that children are rushed to give responses. Moreover, the teacher controls the conversation, usually conducting a kind of extended monologue (Myher & Brause, 1986)... Teachers must realize that children need opportunities to engage in meaningful conversation with adults and with their peers. As Heibert (1990) pointed out, 'Substantive talk is... not a frill; it is a primary means for becoming literate'" (Moss and Fawcett, 1995, pp. 253–254).

Moss and Fawcett conclude that "all parents, minority as well as mainstream, can contribute to the linking of school and home literacies. The appropriate model for having parents in the schools should not be limited to having them teach the school curriculum. Rather, educators need to respect the potential of the many dimensions of family literacy and have parents bring their home curriculum to the school" (Moss and Fawcett, 1995, pp. 254–255).

Programs that Help Families Become More Literate

The last three articles report on programs designed to help parents help their children become literate. Cairney and Munsie (1995) describe The Talk to a Literacy Learner (TTALL) program in Australia; Come and Fredericks (1995) describe the "Families that Read Succeed" program at Pulaski Elementary School in Savannah, Georgia, USA; and Shanahan, Mulhern, and Rodriguez-Brown (1995) report on Project FLAME—Family Literacy: Aprediendo, Mejorando,

Educando (Learning, Bettering, Educating) for Latino/a families in Chicago. These three programs had several things in common. All provided training for the parents that included specific literacy assignments to do with their children; trips to and/or introduction to the local library; regular access to children's literature including either free or low cost books or books regularly sent home with the children; and writing projects that involve both parents and children.

TTALL's parent participants had all left school early and the majority had not proceeded beyond junior high school. The programs goals were to:

- Increase parental participation in the literacy activities of their children
- Change the nature of the interactions adults have with children as they read and write
- Introduce parents (and their children) to a range of literacy practices which are related to success in schooling
- Train community resource people who could be deployed in a wide range of community literacy activities
- Raise community expectations concerning literacy and education
- Serve as a catalyst for a variety of community-based literacy initiatives

There were three stages to the TTALL program:

1. Identify and train 25 parents to interact more effectively with their own children as they engaged in literacy events.
2. Train 15 of the initial group to acquire more advanced skills as literacy tutors so they could work in schools with children other than their own.
3. Train selected parents from stage 2 to act as community tutors to spread the program.

Stage one consisted of sixteen 2-hour workshops over an eight week period. Workshops focused on seven topics:

1. Learning—stressed that parents are their child's first teachers and that children learn at different rates and in different ways. Showed how parents can support learning.
2. The reading process—explored the nature of the reading process.
3. Supporting the reader—stressed that children need a stimulating home environment where reading is encouraged.

4. Using the library—aimed to increase participant's knowledge of the function of the library, including its components and use.
5. The writing process—introduced parents to the understanding that children learn to write by writing and stressed that writing's major purpose is to communicate meaning.
6. Supporting the writer—introduced activities which support and encourage writing in the home.
7. Research—gave participants experiences to assist children in researching a topic.

TTALL documented nine major results of their program:

1. A positive impact on the way parents interact with their children such as offering positive feedback and providing a different focus when listening to their children read, asking qualitatively better questions, and providing qualitatively better responses to their children's writing and reading.
2. Parents began using strategies they didn't have before, such as keeping personal spelling dictionaries, dialogue journals, doing paired reading with their children, helping edit their child's work, and listening regularly to their children reading.
3. Parents learned how to choose resource material, help children select books, and use libraries more effectively.
4. Parents felt they had gained new knowledge and felt more capable of helping their children.
5. Families were effected positively. Parents spent more and a different kind of time with their children and relationships between parents and their children improved.
6. Parents began to share insights outside the family and this spread the effects of the program beyond the immediate family to extended family members, neighbors and friends.
7. Parents gained a greater understanding of schools. This effect was felt not only by the parents, but by was shown by observations of parents working in the classrooms, and by the opinions of teachers and the principal.
8. Children's literacy performance levels, attitudes, and interests improved.
9. School and preschool were positively effected as parents became more involved in school activities, classroom work, and school decision making.

The TTALL program has had many wonderful positive effects for the parents, their children, the school and teachers and for the community. As one mother in the project explained, "It's given me a lot more confidence, you know, he's enjoying it, it's a thousand times better than it was when it started, and I've relaxed, so it's easier. And he's writing, and he didn't before, and it's just—I couldn't be happier" (Cairney and Munsie, 1995, p. 403).

Come and Fredericks report describes the "planning strategies, school-university collaboration, in-school literacy activities, and ideas for home-school connections that have proven effective for at-risk children and their parents through the Families That Read, Succeed! program at Pulaski Elementary School in Savannah, Georgia. This is an inner city school where 95% of the children are from minority groups with low socioeconomic backgrounds. The program was designed to "provide special help in language and literacy development while increasing parental awareness of the importance of their involvement in their children's education through reading books" (Come and Fredericks, 1995, p. 567).

The specific objectives of Families That Read Succeed! were to:

1. Increase students' reading achievement
2. Improve both parents' and students' attitudes toward reading
3. Increase parental involvement in the school
4. Increase the amount of quality time families spend together
5. Foster home-school connections
6. Create lifelong readers who stay in school and become productive citizens who believe in their own self-worth

Parents were involved in planning the program, and Come and Fredericks felt that this was the key ingredient to its success. The parents had the following guidelines for building self-esteem through literacy:

"Spend quality time together.

Encourage your child to read for fun.

Listen carefully to your child's ideas.

Find ways to praise your child.

Enjoy family activities and projects.

Share favorite books and stories.

Talk to your child often.

Establish a daily read-aloud time.

Engage your child in natural reading activities.

Model the act of reading for your child". (Come and Fredericks, 1995, p. 567).

The entire community got together to advertise and promote the program. Flyers, posters, announcements on local radio and in church bulletins, and a billboard (paid for by the selling of hot dogs and soft drinks by parents, teachers, and employees of the grocery store that was helping underwrite the project) and a telephone tree helped announce the workshops and engendered tremendous community support. The mayor attended a workshop and proclaimed February as Family Literacy Month with a focus on the program.

Five parent workshops included demonstrations and hands-on practice in reading aloud; folktale storytelling by a native American of Ogheechee descent; book discussions, with practice talking about the stories, how to extend reading into writing, and relating stories to personal lives; tips from a local librarian; and bookmaking.

Teachers at the school "found that loaning a book to children every day to take home and share with their parents is a simple but effective outreach strategy. One parent commented that since her son has been bringing a book home each day, the family now sits down together after dinner to read his book instead of turning on the TV. She says her husband even looks forward to this time to unwind and settle into the evening as a family" (Come and Fredericks, 1995, p. 569). The school library has also become a lending library for parents and parents now come in to borrow books and ask the school librarian for assistance in making selections. The Pulaski school program is now expanding to include a cross-age reading program and to create a "Reader Corps" of seniors who will come into the school and read stories to the students.

Project FLAME, Shanahan's, Mulhern's, and Rodriguez-Brown's program was developed to help linguistic minority families, (in this case Latino parents) support their children's school learning. The authors feel that "family literacy programs are unique in that they offer simultaneous and connected education for adults and children" (Shanahan, et. al., 1995, p. 586). FLAME "provided literacy training to parents not yet proficient in English so they can support their children's literacy learning" (Shanahan, et. al., 1995, p. 587). The authors also wanted to help Latino families learn how to negotiate the American educational system.

FLAME was based on four assumptions:

1. A supportive home environment is essential to literacy learning.
2. Parents can have a positive effect on their children's learning.
3. Parents who are confident and successful learners are the most effective teachers of their children.
4. Literacy is the subject most likely to be influenced by the social and cultural contexts of family.

The FLAME program provided the following:

- Gave instruction in English as a second language for parents.
- Helped parents learn how to foster their children's educational success.
- Increased opportunities for the parents to learn and use literacy by increasing the available of literacy materials available to them.
- Helped parents learn to use appropriate books and magazines for their children and to use the library.
- Showed parents how to teach the ABCs and letter sounds and how to use language games, songs, and language experience stories with their children.
- Gave parents opportunities to observe lessons in their children's school and meet with teachers to discuss their hopes and concerns.

There were six schools involved in the initial program. Participants lived in one of those school areas and had children ages 3–9. Any adult related to the child in the household could participate. The program was initially taught by graduate students from the local university.

Now, FLAME "is hiring parents from the program to serve as teachers" (Shanahan, et. al., 1995, p. 587).

"Evaluations of FLAME show that... Though we do not directly teach children, its effects with them are evident in significant improvements in their knowledge of basic concepts, letter names, and print awareness... Teachers who have FLAME children in their classes report that these parents come to school more often, are more likely to volunteer and seem to implement teacher suggestions more readily." Also, "parents have greater confidence sharing literacy with their children and helping with homework" (Shanahan, et. al., 1995, pp. 587–588).

The program encourages parents to share books with their children in both English and Spanish. "The best situation for learning is one in which parents can actually read fluently to their children....We teach English, but we continually encourage parents to use their most proficient language with their children" (Shanahan, et. al., 1995, p. 588). Instruction for most of the program is in Spanish. "Parents as Teachers sessions are given in Spanish to emphasize that parents can foster children's learning by talking, reading, and writing with them in Spanish—good news for those who believed that English was needed if they were to help their children to succeed in school" (Shanahan, et. al., 1995, p. 590).

The "Parents as Teacher" sessions include the following topics (Shanahan, et. al., 1995, p. 589):

- Creating home literacy centers—center in a box including pencils, crayons, paper, scissors, paste, magazines, pictures etc. How to make one, how to use it.
- Book sharing—the most effective ways to share books with children. How to talk about books and share books when your own literacy is limited.
- Book selection—quality criteria for selecting books appropriate for children's needs and interests.
- Library visit—public library tour complete with applications for library cards.
- Book fairs—parents buy (with coupons) English- or Spanish-language books for children.
- Teaching the ABCs—simple ways to teach letters and sounds with emphasis on games, songs, and language experience activities.

- Children's writing—how young children write, and ways to encourage home writing.
- Community literacy—how parents can share their own literacy uses with their children during marketing and other daily activities.
- Classroom observations—classroom visits so parents gain a sense of how their children are taught in the schools.
- Parent-teacher get-togethers—guided discussions about children's education with teachers and principals.
- Math for your child—games and activities for helping children understand numbers and arithmetic.
- How parents can help with homework—ways parents can monitor and help with children's homework even when they can't do the homework themselves.

Parent involvement in FLAME program planning has resulted in a few changes over time. "Sometimes parents want to adjust sessions in ways that" (the researchers think) "aren't appropriate to their children's literacy needs, and this is dealt with through negotiation. For example, some parents wanted to work on crafts, with no link to academics. We stood our ground and said that such work would be inappropriate to the purposes of FLAME. Parents persisted, so they were asked to develop plans for using their craft work to support their children's literacy learning. They did so, and now crafts are part of their ESL program—a feature that widens the net of English language development for them, increases motivation, and leads to self initiated activities such as sharing books on particular topics or writing stories about craft activities with their children" (Shanahan, et. al., 1995, p. 588). Parents also got the program to include sessions on helping children with math and homework and providing workshops on gang prevention.

Project FLAME is so well described in Shanahan's, Mulhern's, and Rodriguez-Brown's paper that it could serve as a blueprint for anyone who wanted to start a similar project. At it's best, FLAME shows how ELL parents and children can learn together, which one mother sums up beautifully: "My son is now helping me with my homework and we have a nice relationship and we help each other. He's leaning how to tutor... He's supportive of me" (Shanahan, et. al., 1995, p. 590).

The FLAME and TTALL programs have more in common than their approach and content; they were successful! All three programs reached their aims to promote family literacy and increase the literacy of the children of the participating families. Families got involved in these programs with an enthusiasm that, in many cases, exceeded the expectations of the researchers; and the effects of the programs reached out into the participants' communities in many ways. Families that participate, in addition to becoming more literate, become more active participants in their children's education, in their schools, and in their community. And some participants continue to reach out farther to make a difference. From TTALL: "They are the first ones to turn up for things, to sign up as committee members. They are the ones who are beginning to show an interest in forming a school council" (Cairney and Munsie, 1995, p. 402). And from FLAME: "Leticia, a FLAME mother, moved to another neighborhood and established a program in her children's new school" (Shanahan, et. al., 1995, p. 592). You can't have a better endorsement for the success of a family literacy program than that.

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